

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, September 9, 1878, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Dunoluthoa, Gourrock, near Greenock, Scotland. Sept. 9th, 1878. My darling wife:

I am very glad you have found a nurse who promises to give satisfaction and I am inclined to think you are right in wishing to secure some one older and more experienced than yourself. Still — be careful — and remember it is easier to secure a nurse now than to get rid of her by and by. Be very sure that you have found the right one before you engage her. The fact of this nurse having had the care of these little children for so long a period of time is very important and her experience will certainly be most valuable to Elsie — but on the other hand this advantage would be more than counter-balanced should he presume upon her age and experience and attempt to manage you as well as your baby. This I confess is a point I am very very anxious upon. Don't have her if you are afraid of her. It would be terrible to have to live with a servant you stood in awe of — as some young mistresses have — and doubly so to feel that Elsie was entirely in her hands. This is the great danger I fear in your having a servant very much older and more experienced than yourself. Of course it all depends upon her character and disposition and you must judge of this for yourself. I shall be quite satisfied if you are.

Why would it not be a good plan to insist upon all your servants being able to read and write fluently? You might commence with this one. If you don't understand what she says at any time — make her write it on a piece of paper — It seems to me to be a great mistake to allow any person to come between you and your servants as a sort of interpreter. Why not establish the rule by commencing 2 with this new nurse. Hold all communication with her yourself — even if you should be obliged to write to her to make her understand. Don't allow her to get into the habit of relying on some one else as an

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interperter. I am sure such a plan is damaging to your authority as mistress. It seems to me that if you wish to have a happy and comfortable home — there must be no barrier in the way of free communication between you and your servants. In case of difficulty of comprehension your servants should not be obliged to request the assistance of a third person but should be made to feel that they always have at hand a sure and ready means of communication if they choose to employ it. Why not make the ability to read and write fluently — a sive qua non with all your new servants. Think of this seriously my dear. If you wish them to learn to talk to you — you must meet them half-way — and give them all the assistance possible — (expecially at first) — by encouraging them to write to you rather than go to a third person. Of course talking is so much easier than writing — that after they become accustomed to you and you to them — they would hardly take the trouble to write excepting when you failed to understand what they said by word of mouth -

I am quite sure that a slate in the kitchen — or a little paper and pencil — would often clear away mis-understandings that otherwise might lead to dissatisfaction and separation. Think of it dear — and let me know your opinion. I have told Mrs. McLean and her niece that you have already secured the services of an experienced nurse so they no longer build hopes upon us.

Your letter this morning about the school has thrown quite a damper over my mind and spirits. I have been so happy in my little school — happier than at any time since the Telephone took my mind away form this work. I thought you know that Miss True is not a 3 proficient in Visible Speech — and that she has a very superficial knowledge of our methods of instruction. Her forte is mental development not articulation and she assists me most by taking off my hands the work of mental development thus leaving me free to devote myself to articulation and lip-reading.

You are mistaken in supposing that all the pupils are “babies” Jessie Borthwick is nine years of age and a great deal can be done for her in a very short time. I do not consider myself as working so many hours a day “for a couple of babies” — but as inaugurating a

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revolution in the methods of teaching deaf children in this country. My labours here are to bear fruits in the future. I do not see in this school the two or three children actually present — but the thirty thousand deaf mutes of Great Britain and the thousands of others who are deaf but have not been catalogued in that class. Miss True though an excellent teacher is not competent to start the work here — not through any lack of natural ability on her part — but simply from lack of knowledge.

She has not attended my classes nor does she even know of the methods of utilizing visible speech I have devised. She cannot use the symbols excepting to express English sounds — so that she is quite unable to commence the teaching of articulation upon our plan — for as you know — our plan is to write for the children the sounds they make themselves quite independently of their being English or not. These sounds we take as our starting point. This requires on the part of the teacher a thorough mastery of visible speech — which Miss True has had no means of acquiring. I trust you will therefore see that I am needed and that my presence or absence may mean the success or failure of the new method of teaching articulation in this country. I have been waiting for months past for something to do. I have been absolutely 4 rusting from inaction — hoping and hoping that my services might be wanted somewhere. Now I am needed and needed here. I am not going to forsake my little school just when it is struggling for existence — though the telephone should go to ruin — and though my wife and child should return to America and leave me here to work alone.

I shall make this school a success if I have to remain till Christmas!

It is a sorrow and great grief to me that you always exhibit so little interest in the work I have at heart — and that you have neither appreciated Visible Speech — nor have encouraged me to work for its advancement.

Of one thing I am quite determined and that is to waste no more time and money upon the Telephone. If I am to give away any more of my time — it must be for the object that is

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nearest my heart. If it is absolutely necessary for Mr. Roosevelt's interests that I should go to Paris he must pay my expences from Greenock to Paris and back — and remunerate me for my time — otherwise I will not dream of stirring. I have been twice to Paris for Mr. Roosevelt at considerable expense and inconvenience to myself and neither time was my presence absolutely necessary although he led me to believe so. I don't intend to go the third time. I am sick of the Telephone and have done with it for altogether — excepting as a play-thing to amuse my leisure moments. I write by this mail to Dr. Gallaudet and if I am offered a very moderate salary (say only two-thirds of what is offered to me by the Bell Telephone Co.) — I shall accept it — and trust to my own professional exertions to augment it. We cannot live for many months longer as we have been doing and I must go to work at something that will pay me and at the same time be doing some good in the world. 5 A salary from the college will form a sure nucleus and the fame that has come to me as Inventor of the Telephone will surely assist me in building up a remunerative profession. If the Telephone succeeds well and good — we shall have an income from our shares but my life and my talents are not going to be fettered to it any more. I never would have commenced to work at Telephony had it not been for the temptation of assistance from your father and Mr. Sanders — I never would have continued to work at the subject had it not been that I wished your father and Mr. Sanders to be repayed for the money they had expended upon patents and upon my experiments — and I never would have succeeded in perfecting the Telephone had it not been for the hope of getting you my sweet wife. The struggle is ended now and I long for peace.

Let me go back to the work I love if I can find support for us both. Don't let me be fettered to an unwelcome task — I shall always work at Telephony — but let it be from a love of science, and from a wish to help on the advancement of knowledge. Don't let me bound hand and soul to the Telephone — I don't want to make it my sole means of support. The position of Inventor is a hard and thankless one. The more fame a man gets for an invention — the more does he become a target for the world to shoot at — while no one seems to think the inventor deserving of pecuniary assistance.

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Even your father — instead of advising the Bell Telephone Company to give me a small portion of the surplus money now being divided in America — as some slight return for the time I spent and the pecuniary sacrifices I made in bringing the Telephone to perfection — now wishes as to reduce our small share still further by giving your Uncle Eustis one thousand dollars worth of it for his services in looking after our interests. So long as the net results of such oversight is a minus quantity — I feel that we cannot afford to give away anything of what we possess.

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I am quite willing that your Uncle should be remunerated out of any profits that arise to us — but so long as less than nothing has been received — it would be foolish indeed to give away our capital.

I have laboured long and faithfully in seeking to perfect the Telephone and have never received one cent for my services — not even so much as to cover my personal expenses. I am sick of the Telephone and sick of Patents. I have spent over £600 (\$3000) since we came here upon patents — and what has it all amounted to? Simply worry and expense. Good-bye to it all. I lay it bye in my past.

Morgan Brown may make out his bill — I shall pay it — and that is the last I shall ever have to do with patents. I shall never spend another cent upon patents while I live. If my ideas are worth patenting — let others do it. Let others endure the worry — the anxiety — and the expense — I will none of it. There is too much of the element of speculation in patents for me. A feverish anxious life — like that I have been leading since our marriage — would soon change my whole nature. Already it has begun to injure me — and I feel myself growing irritable, peevish, and disgusted with life.

A small certain salary for a nucleus — and free time to augment it by personal exertion is surely what is best for me and for us. A salary from the Bell Telephone Company — (which itself only enjoys a precarious existence while it is opposed by the Western Union) — is

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two uncertain a thing for me to rely exclusively upon. I don't want to have my all bound up in the Telephone until it has passed safely through the speculative period of its existence. I must have another anchor somewhere until then.

I feel that you are right in thinking it a foolish thing for 7 you to come here. We can't afford any further expense — but it is so hard to be here all alone. I can't reckon the expense when I want to lay my head on your shoulder and be comforted — as only my wife can cheer and comfort me. Oh! my darling — I want to have you in my arms so much and feel that you love me and have some sympathy for me. Still it is perhaps best that we should be as we are and I will try to be reconciled to my fate. I feel that I must remain here for sometime after Mr. Jones' arrival. He must see me teaching — and I must help him to begin. I write by this mail to the Manager of the Bank to place £100 to my credit and to your father to let him know that the first money forwarded to him is yours as well as the last. I feel however, mortified, humbled, and ashamed at being obliged to do this.

Your loving husband, Alec. Mrs. A. G. Bell, 57 West Cromwell Road.